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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000315

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MILITANT HINDUS ATTACK CHURCHES IN SOUTHERN KARNATAKA

¶1. Summary: Militant Hindu groups attacked three churches and six prayer houses located in three southern districts of Karnataka on September 14. The attacks took place between 10:15 and 10:30 as Sunday morning services were in progress. According to Christian groups three individuals including a two and half year old child were critically injured, while twelve individuals suffered minor injuries. Christians launched impromptu protests soon after the attacks and continued protesting on September 15 disrupting traffic and leading to police action. Aggressive proselytization by certain Christian groups allegedly prompted attacks. However, human rights groups blame the ruling Bharthiya Janata Party (BJP) for condoning earlier attacks and thereby emboldening militant Hindu groups. The Christian leadership hope international pressure will prevent further attacks. The Consulate is investigating these incidents to determine the underlying causes and whether the allegations being made by various groups are correct. At this time, there is no indication that the attacks are connected to the recent violence in Orissa. End Summary

Churches and prayer houses attacked in south Karnataka

¶2. (U) Activists of the Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu organization, on September 14 attacked three churches; six prayer halls and the residences of recent converts to Christianity in the districts of Mangalore, Chikmangalur, and Udupi in south Karnataka. The attacks were carried out while Sunday services were in progress. According to Sajjan George, Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), the attacks left three persons critically injured, including a two and half year old child, while fourteen others visited various hospitals for treatment.

¶3. (SBU) Parishioners from the three districts spontaneously launched largely peaceful protests consisting mainly of sit-downs at major thoroughfares on two consecutive days. Protests in Mangalore town disrupted traffic. In response, state police organized baton charges and lobbed tear gas canisters. A.R. Infant, Additional Director General of Police (Law and Order) told post that the situation in the three districts was tense but under control. Additional elements of the Karnataka special police were being rushed into the area to prevent further outbreaks of violence.

¶4. (SBU) Christians continued protests on September 15 staging sit-down protests at various points across Mangalore city. Police again responded with tear gas and baton charges. Some protestors took refuge in Churches. Lakshminarayan, Secretary to Karnataka Chief Minister Yeddyurappa, who toured the affected districts, told post that police entered churches to make arrests after church authorities refused to cooperate. To attract international attention Christian groups posted on the internet video clips of police action inside Churches.

Aggressive proselytization blamed for attacks

¶5. (U) Aggressive proselytization by the Good Life Church and Bible Readers Church is blamed for the attacks. Murlidhara Kajane, a correspondent at The Hindu, a respected English daily told post that

tracts distributed by these two churches contained disparaging references to Hindu gods. He said that local Hindu militants used these tracts to justify attacks while local police used the same publications as evidence to register cases against church authorities for "wounding religious sentiments."

Ruling BJP allegedly fosters indifferent policing

¶6. (SBU) Human rights groups allege that indifferent police responses to attacks organized by the Bajrang Dal on evangelical Christian churches earlier this month spurred further attacks. Manohar, of the South Indian Cell for Human Rights Education and Monitoring (SICHREM), told Post that attacks on Christians did take place in the three districts over the past two months. These attacks were sporadic and focused on evangelical Christian groups with none of the perpetrators apprehended. Possibly emboldened by police inaction, the Bajrang Dal targeted a wide range of Christian churches in the latest round of attacks. Manohar claimed that the police in the southern districts had prior information of possible attacks on Churches but were unable to act in the absence of orders from the political executive. He provided no evidence to support this assertion.

¶7. (SBU) SICHREM's Manohar told post that state Home Minister Acharya, who hails from the area, began his career protesting against the proselytization efforts of the local churches and was unlikely to take on Hindu militants. R.V. Deshpande, a senior Congress leader told post that a tough police response to earlier attacks would have prevented further escalation. The BJP, he said, relied heavily on the Bajrang Dal during elections and hence could not act decisively. Karnataka Chief Minister Yeddyurappa in a

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statement to the local media condemned the attacks and promised to bring perpetrators to book.

Christian leadership hope for international pressure

¶8. (SBU) Comment: Faced with poor state response to attacks on their community, Christian leaders in Karnataka now pin their hopes on international pressure. Sajan George of GCIC said that his organization in partnership with other Christian groups planned to raise awareness in the large Indian American community of the plight of Christians in Karnataka. He hopes their intervention would force the state to afford greater protection to the community. Consulate General Chennai is investigating these disturbing incidents further and will continue to report as additional information becomes available. End Comment.

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